

An account of my involvement with Solidarity - Bob Potter



Bob Potter's previously unpublished 2004 recollections of his involvement in the libertarian socialist group Solidarity in the 1960s and 70s and some of its key figures like Ken Weller and Chris and Jeanne Pallas.

Beginnings

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Aged 16 yrs, I enrolled at Royal Military College, Duntroon (English equivalent is Sandhurst, although Duntroon is modeled on America's West Point). On leave in Melbourne, I stumbled on a Communist Party bookshop and was attracted to an anti-religious pamphlet written by Marcel Cachin. I bought it, along with a copy of the Communist Manifesto. Back at College, in Canberra, I made contacts with the Australian Communist Party. I was



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interested to have discussions, remember looking at Lenin's *State and Revolution*, but remained too critical (for all the wrong reasons!) to ever consider joining. Half-way through the four-year course, I was expelled as a 'fellow traveler' due to my naively declared opposition to the Korean War, which had just begun with Australia's early and eager participation (I say naively – I was genuinely shocked at my expulsion; after all, Australia was a 'democracy', citizens were entitled to their own opinions, surely?!) All this is very relevant for understanding my subsequent fervid commitment to Stalinism; tied up with personal history, the inevitable break with family (my Dad a staff officer in the army). Back in Adelaide, I became an active propagandist for the Rationalist Association –

and learned to speak on a public platform in the Adelaide Park (the equivalent to 'speakers corner' in Hyde Park). My youthful enthusiasms guaranteed I always attracted a good audience. Through the local Communist Party (I was still firmly NOT a member!) I heard about the 'Youth Festival' to be held in (East) Berlin the following August (1951), I needed parental permission (and signature!) for a passport (in those days this applied to those under age 21 yrs!!); permission was

given only on condition of severing *all* relations with the family, terms to which I readily agreed. [I next saw Adelaide, home and family (survivors), 28 years later!]

Australian passports at that time did not permit holders to travel ‘behind the iron curtain’.

[Others returning home from the Berlin festival had their passports confiscated.] For me there was no point in returning - I decided to stay in England. I found some ‘digs’ near Stockwell and looked forward to visiting Hyde Park the following Sunday – where I found a Secular Society platform, I introduced myself and asked to be able to address the crowd. I still hadn’t taken the decision to join the Party, but my enthusiasms for the Stalin regime after several weeks in Berlin, followed by a grand tour of Czechoslovakia (as it then was), culminating with a meeting with Pat Dooley in Prague and a broadcast over Czech radio to fellow Australians supporting the American wars, ensured my new loyalties were rather obvious.

My initial onslaught on Cardinal Mindszenty turned into a Stalinist rant. I was told my speech was “too political” and told I would not be given the platform again.

During the first week in London, I telephoned the Daily Worker¹, through the paper made contact with local (Wandsworth and Battersea) comrades and was virtually “adopted” by the Clapham Communist Party - the ‘Party’ becoming a substitute parent/family offering me a heimat, personally and politically. A job was organized for me at Central Books, where I was interviewed for *suitability* by the recently deceased Betty Reid(!), then one of the directors of the Communist Party bookshop. In those years of the early 1950s, I lived for the party, working in the Central Books dispatch department near Red Lion Square. On reflection, though, I had not yet become a complete robot – I worked in Lambs Conduit Passage, just around the corner, less than fifty paces away, in Red Lion Street, was Freedom Bookshop.

Quite often I would pop in during my lunch hour, chat with the woman who was selling and sometimes buy a copy of the then printed Freedom. (I don’t think I ever did ask her her name?!) Many years were yet to pass before I ‘completed the journey’ to anarchism.

There were regular calls for comrades to ‘enter industry’. It was Des Lock, then London District Secretary of the YCL², who suggested (quite rightly) that I was in need of “industrial experience”. I had no ‘trade’ – he recommended I get a job with London Transport. I became a conductor at Battersea Garage, probably late 1954, and to my surprise found I enjoyed the job immensely. As a stranger to London, the free transport facilities and the lots of free time off, in blocks of several days at a time, midweek, was ideal for exploring the UK. Within a few months I played a large part in setting up a Communist Party branch, six or seven members, in the garage. We produced a monthly Battersea Garage Bulletin, which sold about a hundred copies to the garage staff and soon circulated and sold in other bus depots. Looking

at the odd copy I still have, it is amazing I wasn’t done for libel. The attacks I launched on the local management and right-wingers on the T&GWU³ committee were really (in terms of

‘legal’ common sense!) quite ‘out of order’. The Bulletin soon became one of those screeds combining declarations of the Party line, anecdotes related to fellow workers in their everyday experiences with the public, interwoven with violent attacks upon religious belief

– the sort of stuff that fitted more with Annie Besant in the previous century. [An oft-repeated

“in joke” in the bus garage was that I used to accept money from the staff in return for keeping their names out of the bulletin!]

As a busman and with the backing of the party branch, I stood for the Communist Party in the May 1956 local elections, gaining 14% of votes cast. It was the first time the Party had contested the ward. At an Area Conference of the Communist Party, Battersea Garage branch was acclaimed a ‘model’ industrial branch by Joe Bent, then Industrial Organizer.

But my term in the Communist Party was coming to an end! There was increasing unhappiness within CP ranks on matters of “inner party democracy”. It was against this background, I was approached by the Secretary of my local Party branch, Dougie Moncrieff, now serving on a ‘special committee’ set up by Betty Reid at King Street, investigating Trotskyite infiltration. I was asked to take photographs of the audience at public meetings held by Gerry Healy⁴ on

nearby Clapham Common. (At the time I did not know GH – he spoke under the name John Burns). The Party would pay for and develop the films. I refused.

A few months later, Betty Reid was appointed to head a newly created body to enquire about

“inner party democracy”. I reported all this to my own Garage party branch, who, *as a branch*, opposed the Betty Reid appointment. We asked to address the approaching Party Conference on this issue. Our request was refused. *as a branch*, we resigned from the CP. A few months later, the Hungarian revolution broke out. [This is all more fully described in an article later to appear in Solidarity, and reproduced in David Widgery’s *The Left in Britain*, Penguin (1976) pp 76-77.]

I cannot remember how I first made contact with ‘the T men’ (as the Daily Sketch was to name Gerry Healy’s ‘Group’!). I used to attend meetings at Gerry’s home in Streatham, where I first encountered the Bandas and the legendary Betty Hamilton (who although very ancient, seemed never to miss a meeting); I received help in the continued production of the Garage Bulletin. The London Bus Strike was soon upon us – May/June 1958. I produced an article for Healy’s monthly Labour Review, which Gerry suggested would make a good pamphlet, provided the final paragraphs were jazzed up a bit to incorporate the need for concrete Marxist thinking. Brian Behan was given the task on working on that final section with me. I didn’t really like what was happening, but I wanted the publication to go ahead.

Peter Fryer was overall editor and his first remark to me was that he thought *my* ending had been more appropriate; incredibly, when I reflect on it now, nobody ever seemed prepared to enter into a contrary chat with Gerry, though. Amazing! Anyway, the pamphlet was produced along with a weekly ‘Strike Bulletin’. It was claimed we were selling 30,000 copies of the latter (surely not? My memory must be deceiving me?). I was actively involved in distributing this literature to all bus garages – the interesting point here is that I had no transport of my own, and I was dependent on two comrades with transport. Sometimes I was driven by Jeanne Pallis. Sometimes it was on the back of Ken Weller’s motor bike!!!

And there was [URL=/tags/maurice-brinton] Chris,⁵ who, in those days was Martin Grainger! [incidentally, Chris had several pseudonyms which I have always assumed were perceived by him as matching his various ‘personalities’ -

in the Communist Party he had been N Kastings, in the Trots, Martin Grainger, in Solidarity, Maurice Brinton. There have been different explanations for his name changes; I never discussed this with Chris. But I do remember, early in my days with Solidarity, I wrote a brief note or article to (I think) "Peace

News" and signed it 'MB' and Chris was obviously and understandably very angry. Some of the stuff Chris wrote for Gerry in those days makes interesting reading today. He produced a review on Freud in Labour Review No 3 (1958), where he ridicules the founder of psychoanalysis for categorizing Marxism "as a religion" "with its own illusions"]

I was never a *fully* committed Healyite (although it would be a great mistake to underestimate the very fundamental revelations I found in the books of Trotsky vis-à-vis the counter-revolutionary nature of Stalinism). Gerry himself frequently complained of this – once sarcastically telling me my visits to the 'print shop' were in between visits to the (Buddhist) Temple. When the decision to create the SLL6 was made, I was not prepared to join. Indeed, no doubt a serious repercussion of my experiences with the CP, I have never been able to

"join" anything since! [It was John Sullivan who first said he belonged to Solidarity because he disagreed less with it than he did with any other grouping. That was always to be my view, also!]

Having abandoned Trotskyism, for a time [1959-62(?)] I floated around the Max Adler, Dennis Levin, Joe Thomas, Jack Hartley, Granville Stone, Colin Henry Workers' League, regularly attending meetings and writing fairly regularly for the (mostly) weekly Workers News Bulletin – Towards a Workers' Party. As might be expected, disagreements soon arose; specifically I was accused by some of "still perpetuating Stalinist and Trotskyist elitism".

Stone, alone, remained solidly with me. Increasingly, I found the megalomania of the Workers League something I couldn't live with any longer. Here was this small group of individuals, certainly less than twenty strong (there were no 'membership subscriptions', so it's difficult to draw a sharp division between 'members' and 'supporters'!) - I vividly remember the last meeting I attended with, at most, five other comrades, where Dennis Levin's attack on me was that the policies I was arguing in a recent article, written for the paper, would "in years to come be responsible for the massacre of millions of workers"! Of course my quotation is not strictly verbatim, but the absurdity and meaning (and yes,

megalomania) of what he was saying is accurately reflected. In the previous month I had taken a holiday in Paris and arranged to meet with Grandizo Munis and his Spanish girlfriend, Nicole. (Munis had been not only an active Marxist theoretician but also one of Trotsky's bodyguards in Mexico). The meeting was almost non-political, just a chat – about Trotsky, revolution and rabbits! - (as best we could, given language difficulties) and several cups of coffee (Munis had a largish flat near the Arc de Triomphe). Probably my most vivid memory of the meeting was of Munis lighting a cigarette and some ashes from it falling on his arm, whereupon Nicole rushed to cover the (dead!) ash with her mouth and deliver a kiss.

Such is 'young love' I thought – Munis, of course, was an old man. When I returned home, Levin suggested I was involved in forming some sort of "international faction" with Munis, which was, of course, just plain stupid.

I had remained in close contact with members of the one-time Battersea Garage CP branch; one person in particular, Jim Wigley. We two agreed there was a need for a 'new' party of some sort, but a libertarian party. Ambitiously we styled ourselves the London Workers Group and produced a leaflet setting out our key points. We ran off a couple of thousand copies to distribute to Aldermaston marchers as they came along High Street, Kensington from Aldermaston, 1962. [somewhere, I have a copy of that leaflet – but I have been unable to find it!?] Subsequently, Ken Weller made contact, said he'd seen the leaflet, agreed basically with what we said and suggested we meet. I fixed a date at Jim Wigley's home in Tooting; Ken turned up with Chris. My association with Solidarity had begun!

The Homeless! pamphlet, printed in the early 1960s, was the first I did for Solidarity. It was fun working on it. With minimal editorial help, the "Half-way House" tenants, mostly living in a converted fire-brigade building alongside Battersea Bridge (and Battersea Garage!),

wrote their 'histories'. Their stories, offered with a few 'bits and pieces' giving a wider setting and background, made the 25 page booklet a winner. It received very wide support from sections within the broad (libertarian) movement I would not, in my naivety, have anticipated.

I often think the best pieces I have contributed to Solidarity have not necessarily have been the pamphlets as such. The attraction of the journal often rests with

anecdotal pieces which, with humour, tell the tale more effectively. Four days after the publication of Homeless, the Battersea Communist Party organized a march of homeless tenants through the streets around Clapham Junction. Needless to say, supporters of Solidarity were there to sell their new pamphlet. The ridiculous behaviour of party stalwarts, their rejection by homeless demonstrators and the ‘Comrades’ desperate attempts to get the police to prevent us distributing our literature are, I feel, well captured in my small piece, An Afternoon with the Party, which appeared in Solidarity 2,9. In just a few paragraphs, I believe I succeed in taking the naïve reader ‘inside’ the thinking of the British Communist Party of the time. Another large demonstration I remember in association with the launching of the pamphlet was in front of Newington Lodge, one of the more famous half-way houses discussed in our publication. This latter demo made the front-page of the Sunday Times; a photograph accompanied the text, showing our own Ken Jones addressing bystanders and demonstrators.

Two other major activities are associated with this period when I was first involved with Solidarity. It was a time when ‘the squatters’ were big news. I had no involvement myself –

although visits to Biddulph Road invariably took me through the Chepstow Road area, site of the legendary Rachman empire, where crucial battles were taking place. Ron Bailey attended most of our gatherings; he was soon to be a national figurehead of the squatting movement, at least two valuable books by him, on this topic, published by Penguin. [Ron was also prominent as a leading activist at LSE during this period!!!]

This was the time when ‘pirate’ radios were springing up all over the country. The late Don Bannister, based in the psychology department at Bexley Hospital, had an office at the top/near the top of a tall block; an ideal place for transmitting radio messages. Together with Chris, Ken and ‘homeless’ colleagues, we visited Don’s ‘eagles nest’ and made taped recordings for possible broadcasting. Whether the transmissions actually took place from Don’s office, I do not know. Nor do I know if any of the stuff we taped was actually used –

I’m sure mine would not have been wanted – the Australian accent was far too pronounced, for starters! Elsewhere, at the same time, groups had successfully transmitted on a BBC TV

channel (this *may* have been something involving Andy Anderson in Kent?) **The Two Sources of Solidarity.**

In 1963, exciting events were taking place – events in which several of our more active members were deeply involved. Tragically, I was *not* one of them! In the April of that year, the “Spies for Peace” document crashed through letterboxes throughout the country. My involvement, as was the case for the overwhelming majority of Solidarists, was very marginal. The first I knew of ‘the Spies’ was a special meeting, held in the basement of the ILP7 premises at Kings Cross, where we learned that ‘individuals unknown’ had

‘accidentally’ (!) stumbled on a Regional Seat of Government (RSG), near Reading, and discovered a number of important classified documents. Our meeting was to decide whether we were interested in being involved in the printing, publication and distribution of these this material. All present answered with an enthusiastic ‘yes’. My own ‘involvement’ was to be no more than helping to bundle and address some of the stuff and then, travelling around London in the car with Jeanne Pallis (it would have been the evening of either Tuesday 9th or Wednesday 10th April) - who, interestingly doesn’t remember this! ‘trip out’ with me) where

we posted the stuff in numerous pillar boxes. I remember depositing the largest load at the (then newish) post office in Trafalgar Square.

Our involvement in support of the Spies for Peace was an important time, especially for me; it served to encapsulate for me the essential ‘roots’ of our movement. Solidarity epitomized the coming together of two disparate sources – (a) the old ‘routine’ politicos, who had served their time, often in terms of a ‘progression’ through the various communist/Trotskyite/’left wing’ parties or movements, but had emerged demoralized and disillusioned and (b) the less

‘traditional’ elements, who had perhaps never fallen into the trap of surrendering themselves to political saviours, or ‘leaders’, but instead wanted to express themselves in terms of ‘direct action’, ‘do it yourself’ activities. This latter constituent had earlier gravitated to the Committee of 100, but were frustrated by a movement that although it sought to be ‘active’, had become increasingly frustrated with the activity goal seemingly never going beyond getting more and more people to sit down in ever increasing numbers in bigger ‘squares’, blocking larger ‘street’, but not always prepared to be seen as ‘breaking the law’.

(Amazingly, at this time, I remember many discussions with individuals in the broader movement who, *at the same time*, wanted a ‘revolution’, but were not prepared to ‘break the law’!)

The production of the ‘illegal’ document and its distribution demonstrated how these two that sitting down in public squares and/or roadways had no viable future. ‘sources’ *could* work together. At the same time, the experience provided very valuable lessons for revolutionaries illustrating how the ‘methods’ they must adopt in their day to day revolutionary activity dovetailed in with the theory of rank and file management of their actions. Because the principle followed was that everybody involved knew “only what they needed to know”, there was minimal chance that those who had been responsible for this magnificent exposure of the secret machinations of a government, more than happy to expend the lives of the overwhelming majority of the population, would themselves be identified and ‘caught’. In contrast to the ‘traditional’ politics of the ‘traditional left’ at that time, which saw social change in terms of ‘capturing bureaucratic leaderships’ in the official movements, the whole emphasis of Solidarity’s approach to the struggle revolved around the more democratic

‘unofficial’ movement, based, in industry on the shop floor rather than in a union office, officered with non-elected ‘officials’. The state sought the ‘leaders’ of this latest threat to their power monopoly – their failure was virtually inevitable, there were to ‘leaders’ to catch!

The aftermath of all this was equally exciting. Sensibly, only those directly involved knew the whole story, in relation to the aspects related to their own personal involvement. It is easy to forget the ‘cautious fear’ all of us had at this time, even those of us, like me, only *very marginally* involved. My own copy of the document arrived in the post and I promptly loaned it to a life-long friend and fellow ex-communist, Jim Paterson. When I asked for it back, a few weeks later and after the hullabaloo had died down a bit, he confessed he’d burnt it rather than be found ‘in possession’. I’m probably the only ‘old’ Solidarist without a copy of the original document! Subsequent ‘bits and pieces’ about this marvelous achievement, I gleaned came from Chris; we would go for a walk to the bottom of his garden – he was convinced, probably correctly, that 18 Biddulph Road was “bugged” – and I would get the latest

‘information releases’! This strategy applied to other, similar ‘events’. I

remember getting all the details about the George Blake escape into the DDR also at the bottom of the garden. This was the period when a large Alsation dog, Nera (who without provocation bit everyone (more correctly, ‘nipped’ everyone!) – I received several ‘nips’!) was installed to greet unannounced, visiting security agents.

In a brilliant feat of inter-group cooperation, the ILP, Freedom Press and SWF jointly prepared Resistance Shall Grow (RSG6d!). Various chapters were undertaken by various

individuals – some of the contributors having not been involved in the activity itself, at all, I wrote chapter 10 (The functions of parliament and the state). [I leaned heavily on Harvey and Hood: The British State (1958)]. Essentially, putting it all together was largely done by Chris

– although he would probably deny this! It went through several printings and was probably and deservedly one of the best selling pamphlets we had been involved with at that time. The

‘Black’ Solidarity was produced for sale to the 1963 Aldermaston marchers - it carried one of my better contributions, Thoughts on Bureaucracy – which I understand has just been reprinted in the US in an anarchist anthology.

Back to the Buses.

Returning to the more mundane – my next contribution was the Busmen What Next?

pamphlet. By now (1964), I'd been off the job a few years, but still immensely interested. A colleague of many years, both as one-time CP member and a conductor, Brian Whitby (still a friend I see regularly!) provided a superb overview of "what it's like to work on the buses".

Add to that, another of the earlier Battersea Garage CP membership, Fred Whelton's introduction to life in the maintenance shops, with Ken Weller documenting the 'history of bus work', and the inimitable ex-conductor, anarchist writer and artist, Arthur Moyse, culminating with a concluding summary of 'the London Bus Story' by myself (which had already been published in Solidarity 3,2, the previous December). It proved a good seller.

Like the traditional Hollywood publicists who follow their successful Frankenstein with the Bride of Frankenstein, Solidarists supported my flying to Glasgow to help in the writing of Glasgow Busmen in Action. Here I first met up with George Williamson, who with another comrade introduced me to the various strike committees. (In Glasgow I was put up by Jim and Maria Fyfe. Jim (now dead) was at work most of the time; I had a few discussions with Maria, who seemed not too interested in Solidarity politics (or any politics to the best I can recall our chats over the washing up. A few years later she contributed to Solidarity with an article about 'promiscuous sex'.). I remember subsequently being surprised to learn she had been elected Labour MP for Glasgow Maryhill.) The Glasgow bus pamphlet sold well 'north of the border'. I was to return to Glasgow two years later (in 1966) to cover a broad unofficial meeting and action of bus workers against the T&GWU bureaucracy. This was reported in Solidarity 4,1. The two bus pamphlets like the Homeless one earlier had set a pattern that was to be followed on other topics – where ordinary individuals were enabled to put their experiences into writing, all bound together into an overlapping 'anthology' style publication.

I was soon to be moving out of London. The last pamphlet I worked on before going was Vietnam (No 20). It gave rise to heated controversy, reflected in

several editions of the journal. Two ‘re-writes’ were to follow during the decade that followed

Also in those ‘final days’ of living in London, I helped Bretta Carthey put together the story of the great Australian mining strike at Mt Isa. In fact, Bretta had done all the work, amassed all the material, but had just allowed it all to ‘pile up’ on her. To be fair I didn’t deserve the joint credit of authorship – to which, for some reason, she insisted! [We made contact with a number of Aussies who had been involved or interested in the Mt Isa struggle. I returned to Australia for a brief visit in 1978 and met two (Adelaide) contacts – but so far as I know, Solidarity was unable to ‘keep the dialogue going’.] Bretta was living in Derby at the time and I recall visiting her there with John Sullivan – whose brother, Jim, lived in that town and put up John and myself. Unfortunately, John died a few months ago. Maybe Bretta remembers why we came?! [I had been friendly with John Sullivan for some time. He remained with the SLL for some time; I used to sell literature jointly with him in front of Battersea Power Station, where he worked. He was one of the many I lost touch with when I moved to Brighton.]

My chronology is no doubt well adrift. During this period there were occasional meetings of the International Socialists (IS)⁸ which several of us used to attend in the Kings Cross area..

A major discussion theme at that time was the theory of the “permanent war economy” which was being pushed by Mike Kidron – capitalism could solve its economic problems for the immediate future so long as it had something to do with its surplus – Mike would argue they might build pyramids, or more profitably make and sell armaments. There were elements here that fitted reasonably with the sort of things Solidarity was saying, namely that capitalism can solve its problems (by studying Karl Marx!). IS in those days had many members of a libertarian outlook and we seemed to integrate quite well most evenings.

Presumably Tony Cliff⁹ thought there was a chance I’d join his ranks, for when I planned getting married in 1965, I was invited to his home with my wife to be to ‘celebrate’ the event.

I don’t remember the evening too well, but It was the first time I met Tony’s “Honey” and I assume, but I’m not sure, Mike Kidron lived with them – he was

in and out all the evening, but didn't join the discussions. ("Honey" just played the role of 'housewife' and talked about South Africa over the meal!). I went off with a pile of International Socialism journals (have I remembered the name of their journal accurately, from that period?). The IS cadre hoped to recruit from Solidarity – but most of us, like me, were solidly non-receptive to returning to the realms of 'democratic centralism', although our comrade, John Sullivan, was to prove more amenable to them(?).. I remember dropping in on Paul Foot, with Chris and Ken – the only memory I have of that visit was going to the toilet to find a "Bert Benson was here!"

sticker above the pan – which surely must date our call.

With Solidarity comrades I remember a huge demonstration against the visiting Greek queen, in the Aldwych (had they been to a theatre?); the police were very aggressive on. I was a few feet from Louis Mountbatten, in conversation with senior police officers and regretted having no camera, so perfectly did he symbolize, in his 'outfit', everything most objectionable about the privileged ruling class and monarchy. (I remember being amazed just how tall he was!) Names from that time needing insertion are Stuart Christie, who was occasionally around Biddulph Road, and Dona Papert, whom I stupidly challenged over a chess board; she warned me in advance she was "extremely good", that I'd not last more than a "few moves" - and proceeded to demonstrate the truth of her prediction. Playing Dona was worse than being thrashed by a computer – and just as immediate!

Moving to Brighton.

In 1965, I had married and moved to Brighton. During the next few years, we would entertain many Solidarists from many lands – Jim Evrard (who stayed for a while with his Iranian partner – and (he) upset my wife on arrival by deliberately frightening the daylights out of my

‘less than a year old’ daughter, telling us she had to learn this was a hostile world!), Jenny James (later to become heavily involved in psychiatric work), Nick Walter, Arnold Feldman, Joe Jacobs, Andy Anderson (who came with his family for a long weekend), Jackie Petit (a College friend of Chris’ going back many years, who had put us both up in her Paris flat when we were ‘on honeymoon’ – she and her kids came for a week or so!), Ben Birnberg, Dudley Edwards (who did a magnificent job setting up an unemployment centre in Brighton

– he had retired to Saltdean, a few miles down the coast, Chris, Jeanne and Ken, to name a few. [At about this time there were a number of American colleagues, I think mostly from Berkeley, around. Barbara Garson I remember well (although I don’t think I was au fait with her MacBird!) and I think she had a husband called Marvin(?). Barbara always had something relevant to contribute

Fortunately, we were always at home on a Sunday morning. On 2 October 1966, there was a ring of the front doorbell – as the door opened, Ken Weller stormed in, accompanied by Andy

Anderson and half a dozen others. The Labour Party conference was due to open the following day; there was a pre-conference church service in the town’s main Methodist Church; lessons were to be read by Harold Wilson and George Brown. And guess what? Ken Weller just happened to have a pile of forged ‘admission’ tickets for the service. I don’t need spell out what happened when Foreign Secretary George Brown read out “Nation shall not lift sword against nation – neither shall they learn war any more”. There were (I think) nine persons arrested and charged. In the weeks of custody prior to the trial, where our comrades were punished for their “disgusting” and “indecent” behaviour, our home in Brighton became an ‘unofficial’ guest house for several of the families- and provision of refreshments for all and sundry, including (a much younger)

Ben Birnberg!

The Rape of Vietnam pamphlet was an expanded and ‘re-printed’ version of the earlier one, but still led to wide dispute. Republished in Philadelphia by American Solidarists(!), some of the critical comments were included as appendices; the text was further enlarged, and appeared in 1975 as Vietnam: Whose Victory?; many of our people opposed my formulation of Stalinism as “counter revolutionary” and my hints at tactical necessities for revolutionaries in this kind of situation. The ‘official’ Solidarity ‘line’ was that “the Russian bureaucracy represents a viable new form of class rule”. It was agreed by us all that there should be a Solidarity Appendix to argue these differences in greater detail. The final version, Vietnam: Whose Victory?, is still offered (at considerably inflated prices) by many booksellers on the Internet. It was reprinted in the USA, Canada and Germany. I have no idea the numbers sold.

I was delighted the late Nick Walter reviewed it (at the time of printing) as ‘the best of the Vietnam pamphlets on offer’. There was also a printed German edition: Vietnam Superstar.

Sieg fur Wen?

Retreating a little, chronologically, the final ‘big’ pamphlet I did for Solidarity was Greek Tragedy, published in April 1968, a year after the ‘Colonel’s Coup’, carried out without any proper opposition. I was left pretty much to myself to get on with it (Ken Weller sent me a useful source book). It was produced without any real fuss; I have no idea how it sold. My suspicions are it was *not* one of our ‘great hits’. I think my term with Solidarity was almost ended – although there was one small anecdotal piece I did about the local ‘watch committee’

placing a ban on the showing of the film of James Joyce’s Ulysses. Under the title Ulysses Dowsed by Fire Brigade, it appeared in 4,9 edition of the journal, and prompted enthusiastic welcome from several, including Peter Fryer, from whom I hadn’t heard for some time.

[Peter had been thrown out of the Daily Worker for truthfully covering the Hungarian uprising in 1956, had collaborated with Gerry Healy, editing his Newsletter, but did not join Healy’s sect. Following Healy’s exposure and expulsion, he wrote regularly for Workers Press (I bought odd copies just because it contained Peter’s regular piece.) I last saw Peter at Brixton town hall,

some time in the late 1980s.]

[Finalizing the text of this version of the Greek pamphlet provided an opportunity for an enjoyable day with Jeanne and Chris, here in Brighton. They arrived fairly early in the morning and while Marigold and Jeanne finalized food preparation and chatted about child-rearing, Chris and I went through the final text. As was *always* the case, the majority of Solidarity publications would never have been the success they were without Chris' skilful editing and modification (with agreement) of the text. Having agreed the text and scoffed some food, we then, accompanied by our two daughters (aged almost 2 years and a few months, respectively) enjoyed a picnic in the grounds of nearby Bramber Castle – an event now immortalized by the photograph on the back cover of *For Workers Power: The Selected Writings of Maurice Brinton* (edited by David Goodway), AK Press (2004).

From Bramber, we cut back to Rottingdean and joined the seagulls along the top of the cliffs, facing the sea at Brighton.

Around this time I became less and less ‘involved’ with Solidarity. Under financial pressure, there were moves to make it a ‘membership’ organization. It will come as no surprise that this was *not* an idea I would want to endorse. I continued to communicate, from time to time, with Ken; in the Spring of 1985, contributing an article for the journal on the reviving fortunes of fundamentalist religion – after being ‘sacked’ for about the twentieth time in my life, I had returned to full-time education and was completing a D Phil on ‘Fundamentalist Christianity’. [I spent considerable time at university working in the field of ‘artificial intelligence’ – following the footsteps of old comrade Seymour Papert, whose contributions to this field are internationally recognized. A field also joined by our comrade Aki Orr!]

While on campus, I shared running a weekly literature stall, selling anarchist and Solidarity publications. In those years there were fairly frequent visits from the late Arnold Feldman and Joe Jacobs, especially if there was something ‘exciting’ billed at the university. I almost always finished up arguing bitterly with Joe – but I learned much from him – I especially remember his tales of Cable Street – until then I’d always imagined the battle took place *in* Cable Street! I also remember with pleasure his many monologues cutting the legendary Phil Piratin down to size!

I still have the tragic note I received from Jeanne on 20 April 1977: "...Arnold died last night of a heart attack in the course of one of his trips outside London. We are all most upset as Arnold was one of the nicest, most genuinely kind men we knew." Indeed it was true. He was always bringing gifts – I have several books I know he must have purchased especially for me; Marigold still treasures a purse he gave her on one visit.

In a very real sense, I was dying intellectually. I had taken a job as a depot manager in the building industry and was constantly aware of my 'discomfort' at my new situation. I tried to keep a foot in the 'revolutionary' side of things, but it wasn't possible. My 'swan song'

article related to this time of my life (!!!) is surely Beware the Wily Boss!, in November 1974. My discomfort is reflected by my refusal to sign it; I insisted, initials only! I was in need of a new life!

The attractions of Solidarity for me were the open-mindedness of discussions, no 'political lines' that *had* to be endorsed, plenty of opportunity to argue either verbally or in the journal.

I was often a little more of a traditional 'Marxist' than the majority of the group; on several occasions my contrary view (on economic matters) was given ample space for propagation.

Cardan's History and Revolution failed to impress me; I thought many of his stances were culled from Merleau-Ponty (very popular in existentialist/phenomenologist -style circles in the early post-war years), it selected semi-quotations and misrepresented bits of Marx.

[Indeed I have never 'been happy' with Cardan's doctrines – I listened to him carefully, at early Solidarity meetings and the excellent 'conference' we held in Soho Square in the early sixties (Alasdair MacIntyre attended).] I was *not* wishing to return to the traditional

'Marxism'. There was an unsatisfactory 'Discussion Bulletin' printed with two pieces, by myself and Chris. I'm not sure how many members felt involved (interested?) in the debate –

certainly nobody wrote to me about it. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, maybe, if I were Chris, I'd be a little unhappy about some of my earlier

formulations regarding the

‘viability of the Soviet bureaucracy’?! [For a time I flirted with Raya Dunayevskaya, acting as her ‘literature distributor’ in the UK as she published her Philosophy and Revolution and Rosa Luxembourg books in the early 1970s - but her fanatical deification of Hegel and Lenin were tough to digest! Solidarity happily printed my supportive review of the first of those publications in 4:7, May1967]

The Big Three – Chris, Jeanne, Ken.

Although they would each deny, vigorously, what I am about to say, the origin and continuance of Solidarity was dependent upon three individuals. In spite of my involvement with this three over a number of years, I never got to know any of them intimately; not surprisingly, *the remarks I am about to make will, at times, sound unbelievably trivial.*

In the first instance, the first Solidarity representative any potential recruit would meet would almost always be Chris or Ken, most commonly, both of them together. Both these comrades have the ability to dicuss with, meaningfully relate to, individuals from academic, professional, industrial or even ‘lumpen’ levels of society. Obviously, it was easier, more appropriate for Ken to lead the discussion if the potential recruit came from an industrial background, Chris more suited for establishing a bond with those of academic or professional status.

Chris.

Chris' multitude of skills revolved around his linguistic competence – in several languages –

and the clarity of thought usually associated with competence in different languages (he spoke perfect French, English and Greek. Undoubtedly the majority of Solidarity publications are a living testimony to Chris' linguistic competence, for most of them (certainly true of my own) are as good as they are because of his 'modifications' to the submitted texts.

[An excellent illustration of his ability with words is readily available in his A B C of Brain Stem Death, consisting of articles originally published in the British Medical Journal and published as a booklet by that body in 1983. Chris always seemed reluctant to discuss his professional work with his political associates, but his work in this area was always of great interest and I made a point of buying it as soon as it was published. It is written for the profession – but readily accessible to any intelligent lay reader.]

There were times he seemed 'not to tolerate fools gladly' (impatient with some unable to keep up with the *rationale* of his argument), although there were occasions I was puzzled by his apparent inability to leave the tramlines of his own thinking (e.g. when we talked about the price of sugar or labour power as perceived by Marx). Similarly, I still cannot decide to what extent he was 'pulling my leg' when he reported at great length his conversion to belief in 'dowsing' during a holiday in Ireland.

There were times when he might irritatingly 'forget' (?) promises made. From somewhere he acquired a pile of Robert Daniels', *The Conscience of the Revolution*. It was a book we were all 'into' at the time and I asked Chris to reserve me a copy. Tragically, when I arrived to collect it, he'd sold my copy to someone else! Then there was a perceived slight regarding a piece I was working on equating the ideologies of Stalinism and Nazism – Chris (and presumably most others in the group!) didn't like my efforts; presumably not wishing to upset me too much, it was suggested another comrade work on it with me to 'get it into shape'. The

‘other comrade’ duly turned up with suggested modifications I saw as undercutting my text by inserting a multitude of non-academic, tertiary, personal anecdotes. I’d have been left much happier had Chris been ‘more brutal’ from the start and told me I’d produced a load of nonsense – and left it at that! But I never received a methodical listing of what was wrong with my draft, which is what would happen when Chris favoured a project and wanted to help it on its way. Instead a Solidarity comrade was dispatched to Brighton to “put me right” – and what I believe was a reasonably presentable academic effort, was reduced to a pile of ‘hear-say’ gibberish. Such are the trivial details we remember, with hurt, almost half a century later

– and I still find myself wondering if Chris’ *real* objection was the ‘identification’ of Fascism/Nazism with Stalinism/Trotskyism; the real explanation for the ease in which whole outfits of the German Communist Party were able to move en bloc into the NSDAP! Was

there an inner refusal by Chris (and many other debris from ‘traditional’ revolutionary politics?) to accept he had once supported these bodies I was equating with Hitlerism?

Please don’t misunderstand what I am saying about Chris! I feel I learned a tremendous amount from my association with him. Although I have not seen him, face to face, for more than twenty years, in a political discussion I often ‘catch myself’ explaining a point using words I first heard from Chris; such is the indelible character of the experience. He had the incredible ability to present as almost totally ‘self-effacing’, while successfully pushing a point home. Perhaps his approach to people is best illustrated by one occasion – I remember selling pamphlets with him once, at the entrance to a London hospital. “What do you do for a living?”, asked an aggressive potential purchaser. “I’m just a hospital worker, too”, Chris replied. I formed the distinct impression the passer-by had listened to the reply, and decided, quite definitely, Chris probably worked as a lift operator!

But having said all that, the very nature of Solidarity, especially in the period of the Spies for Peace, ensured that *only one person had all the information at his fingertips – only one individual was in contact with everybody, everywhere*. He also provided the financial support, the ‘assets’ of the group, and in Jeanne the most valuable human asset, totally committed to the technical production of the journal, as well as the general, ever competent runaround where such was

necessary. While most members had only a little knowledge of what was going on, only Chris was in this central position, aware of all that was happening at every level – perhaps shared, at times, with a few, mostly Ken Weller.

Of course I can only speak from my own, very limited perspective - I'm sure there will be other sources more knowledgeable regarding Chris' help to revolutionaries (national and international) on a *grander* scale and in a professional capacity. There are other, more personal, considerations often forgotten. For example, when I flew to Glasgow (see earlier) a cheap flight necessitated catching something in the early hours of the morning and returning, at the same time, two nights later. On both occasions, Chris insisted I bed in his front room; he delivered and collected me to and from the air terminal. Although he would deny it, Solidarity depended upon Chris in every respect. It was heavily subsidized by Chris'

contributions; there was hardly an evening when he wasn't available to meet with people, to take car loads of comrades to venues all over the country. Mostly the traveling costs, petrol, etc were met by Chris and Jeanne. Not only did almost all publications depend upon his editorial work, in addition to his own theoretical contributions. Whenever there was a demo, Chris would be in the front line of those selling the pamphlets! [personally, I believe his most important piece was the Bolsheviks & Workers' Control. He might agree with me?! My own copy arrived in the post straight from the press – duly inscribed, "To Bob with best wishes Chris - July 1970 –". This had not happened before – or since. I have always assumed Chris himself believed he'd done something *really* important!]]

In the years I was associated with Solidarity, there must have been a score of 'conferences'

attended thanks to the transport offered by Chris. There was one in Leeds, where he drove us to the university (no recollection as to what the two-day meeting was about, but I shared a room with Chris in somebody's home). There were many meetings with John Lawrence –

whose daughter was a medical student, of obvious interest to Chris. Once we visited Oxford –

a brief visit to Edward Thompson (an article by him had earlier appeared in

Healy's Labour Review in the same copy as my bus strike article) – and then, afterwards, a brief drop in on Peter Cadogan, who always seemed determined to convince all his listeners he was “into everything, everywhere”. (In this respect, he exposed himself to (informed) public ridicule by attempting to portray himself as an ‘insider’ in the Spies for Peace!) Twice (or more?), Chris took a car load of us to Paris – there was one gathering at the Sorbonne, where Chris and Jeanne were already there. I flew into the airport to be met by Cardan, who took a circuitous

route to the university to show me the sights (ignoring my telling him I was vaguely familiar with the city). Again, I don't recall the details of the conference (with SoB10); although I helped distribute leaflets I could not read (I have no French), but I do recall the sessions in the street café, where Cardan despaired of young comrades more interested in watching the newly released film, *The Magnificent Seven* rather than attending his political meeting. On one occasion (maybe twice?) we called on Jeanne's parents – I remember her Dad being a postal worker; we sat in their kitchen and from the windows one looked over Paris suburbs.

I have made several references to the ‘day-to-day’ financial management also taken care of, carefully, by Chris. There were ‘schemes’ to keep costs down (involving re-use of postage stamps!); needless to say, collating Solidarity almost always took place at Chris’, where coffee and biscuits were always on tap. Odd individuals made contributions, but I suspect most didn't. When I was there, there were never collections to cover costs – the general assumption always seemed to be that ‘Chris would pay’!

Ken

Oddly, I have had more regular communication with Ken over forty years than with any other Solidarity comrade, yet in many respects I feel I hardly know him at all! Throughout the period of our acquaintance, I find he has often ‘come up’ in conversation with others, say Jeanne, for example, and I’m always learning bits and pieces about him, personally, that I’m sure would never come from him directly. He is a very private person – and I have assumed it is not just to me that he is (in the friendliest way possible!) distant. I remember when we first moved to Brighton, his wife Gwyn came to stay with us (by this time that included the new baby!) for a while, but not Ken – and I remembered Jeanne had once informed me “Ken always likes to sleep in his own bed”. I think she was referring to Ken’s reluctance to bed down at Biddulph Road – he certainly would not have been ‘in his own bed’ during his many expeditions, Paris to Moscow, all over the UK – or the several occasions when he was accommodated by our judicial system.

Yet throughout the years after I ‘left’ Solidarity (not really the appropriate way to put it – I never ‘left’, I just declined to ‘join’) – he always kept in touch, Solidarity continued to arrive, occasional letters or notes. On the few occasions I sent stuff to him, it always received a reply; I have mentioned earlier the essay on fundamentalist Christianity, which appeared in Solidarity, Spring 1985. Recently, our communications have often been related to the deaths of old comrades – Brian Behan, John Sullivan – and now, Chris Pallis.

I doubt if I ever attended a major event in which Solidarity was involved without seeing Ken there. In this sense he is probably even more associated in my mind with that body than any other individual; if all the old comrades from the past are currently being contacted, I’m sure that, without exception, the name Ken Weller will always figure first in their listings of

‘comrades remembered’. Oddly, for me (again the theme of ‘how the mind works’!), the name of Ken Weller *always* takes me back to that run around South London on the back of his motor bike, delivering London Busmen in Battle, the pamphlet I had written for Gerry Healy, to garages. We stopped before a group of shops the other side of Richmond Bridge.

Ken decided he was ‘peckish’ and asked me if I wanted anything to eat in the way of a snack.

I said ‘no’. Ken went into the shop – and emerged with two Mars Bars – he insisted I have one of them. I took a bite – it was terribly sugary, much too sweet for me and then, as we moved off towards Isleworth bus depot, I let the remainder fall on the roadway. I didn’t want to cause offence. That I have so often remembered this incident (*every time I see a Mars Bar!*) yet feel I am ‘keeping a secret, after forty years, must say something relevant to my feeling of never managing to ‘get close’ to Ken. Yet my feelings towards him are of such gratitude and affection!

Jeanne

And Jeanne! Of course she might(?) deny it – but it is nonsense to talk of the success of Solidarity without mention of the dedication and expertise of Jeanne, whose typing, layout skills and stencil preparation made our paper vastly superior to equivalent journals at the time. It is always a thankless task; comrades scribble their grotty little articles and seem to imagine it ‘just happens’ – spelling errors are corrected, illegible text becomes an easy read –

it ‘just happens’. That it happened was largely due to Jeanne – in between carrying out a million other thankless tasks ... driving colleagues and pamphlets wherever required ... and making ‘strangers’ feel ‘at home’.

In between collating tasks, I enjoyed (and learned) much in conversations with Jeanne. She and I had a shared love of books. Some of my early discussions with her related to Simone de Beauvoir. I had read her autobiographical books, was especially entranced with Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter, but equally gripped with The Mandarins, although not quite sure who all the characters really were. I still remember our chats. Jeanne told me I’d only get the best of Simone if I learned to read French – unfortunately I didn’t ask her how she knew the English translations missed so much; surely she would not have read the stuff, herself, in English? I remember Jeanne having her own little bookcase and she would often say how a person’s books are a part of that person ... if you wish to know someone, look at his or her books. So borrowing somebody’s book was like ‘borrowing a part of that person! I remember borrowing a book once (but can’t remember what it was); Jeanne was clearly anxious I might forget to return it.

After a long absence, I visited Jeanne a little more than a year ago, in summer 2003. Not being quite so physically agile as she was, she showed me where her bed now was – in the front room downstairs, her books now covering the wall nearby. She made a point of telling me this – all the books she wanted “were now in *easy reach*”. (I think she exaggerated her present physical ability somewhat!).

Returning to the 1960s. I had picked up a copy of Immanuel Velikovsky’s *Oedipus and Akhnaton* and had found it gripping. At this time Velikovsky had not been exposed as the fraud scholar he is – or if he had been, I (and Jeanne) were not aware of it. I remember lending her the book, which she read, but obviously not with the enthusiasm I had hoped to share. There were lots of discussions about Wilhelm Reich and his sex theories at this time; these were areas where Jeanne also had strong views but seemed not always to want to pursue discussions to the limit. The key point Jeanne was always making was her opposition to those who would ‘de-humanize’ sexuality and reduce the ‘act of love’ to a physical act rather like excretion. I remember one discussion with Jeanne and Bretta ; I cannot remember the context, but I made one of my more stupid remarks to the effect that, probably, if I were a woman, I’d probably find Gerry Healy ‘attractive’. Jeanne shuddered (Bretta wouldn’t have known Gerry) and said she could *not* agree with me. I asked her to elaborate, but she replied, “You’d need to be a woman to understand”. I reminded Jeanne of this discussion during my 2003

visit. She has no recollection – adding she had absolutely no idea of Gerry’s sexual activities until she read about them in the press. I’m *not* imagining the earlier conversation, but obviously Jeanne, had not been referring to Gerry’s raping potentialities.

In my early days with Solidarity, I would often cycle to meetings in Biddulph Road. I had a very long, green plastic coat, reaching to my ankles when I stood erect. Jeanne would often mock my old coat and tell me it was the sort of coat the Nazis occupying France would wear.

“Hermann Goering had one!”, exclaimed Jeanne. I kept the coat for many years; it was always known at home as my ‘Hermann Goering coat’! I always enjoyed the brief chats with Jeanne and often picked up quite obvious ‘facts’ I’d previously not actually thought about. I

remember my naïve surprise when she told me that for the average French person, provided they were not Jewish, the German occupation was much more ‘enjoyable’ than the American one that followed!

Jeanne had(has) a wonderful sense of humour; it is a tragedy I cannot remember more of her barbed remarks. I do remember, on one occasion, her asking Chris what to do with a draft text or letter about something. Chris said it should be put on file. “I know why”, Jeanne responded, “so that, sometime in the future, when somebody is preparing a ‘history of Solidarity’, one can point to this document and say, ‘There! There was the origin of the Solidarity bureaucracy!’”

There were many occasions, I feel (and felt) that Jeanne was treated ‘as a woman’, as a

‘secondary citizen’ within our organization.

And Afterwards?

I have mentioned earlier how I had floated around the perimeters of the anarchist movement for many years. At about the time I was entering Solidarity, I remember going to a meeting at Colin Ward’s home, situated not far from and to the north of Putney Bridge. It was an ‘odd’

meeting, where one of the major discussion points was Jack Robinson’s toothache. He was in agony, yet holding forth for a lengthy time, about why he was *not* prepared to visit a dentist.

[I mentioned reminisce this to Colin many years later. He vaguely remembers the meeting, says it was exactly the sort of thing Jack would have been on about, but couldn’t really recall it specifically.] The main topic was aspects of Marxist economic theory; but it was more an informal social gathering than a serious debate.

After Solidarity, I regarded myself an anarchist and was a regular subscriber to Freedom.

Over the years I have contributed a few articles to that excellent paper (not so much recently)

– and more substantive contributions to the Raven (now, sadly, ceased printing!)

on Christian Fundamentalism (27), Psychotherapy and Religion (35), and finally, a small reprint from an earlier contribution to Freedom, omitted from the ‘contents’ of Raven (42).

For four years (1999 – 2003) I served as membership secretary and treasurer of the Council for Academic Freedom and Academic Standards. Readers of THES will be familiar with this body. I am now retired – but just can’t die. Currently heavily engaged in a campaign against the manipulation of Housing Choice in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets

About fifty Solidarity comrades met together at Golders Green crematorium to say farewell to Christopher on Sunday morning, 20th March 2005. Those of us surviving have aged well. *I appreciated very strongly that for nearly half a century I have considered myself a Solidarist!*

Tragically, those of us remaining are high on nature’s “hit list” – I’m sure none of us regrets a single minute of the time we have served.

Bob Potter



1. All footnotes by libcom.org. Daily Worker was the paper of the Communist Party



2. Young Communist League, youth group of the Communist Party



3. Transport and General Workers Union



4. A well-known Trotskyist, who became a leading figure in the Workers Revolutionary Party, and sexually assaulted many female members



5. Chris Pallis was a noted brain surgeon, often better known by his libertarian socialist pen-name Maurice Brinton



6. Socialist Labour League: predecessor to the WRP



7. Independent Labour Party



8. Precursor to the Socialist Workers Party



9. Leading theoretician of IS



10. French libertarian socialist group, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, of which Paul Cardan/Cornelius Castoriadis was a leading dear attrition.